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# Exploring the Pleasures and Perils of Participant Observation in Researching Heterosexual Identities

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**Key words**: participant observation; reflexivity; qualitative fieldwork; feminist methodologies; heteronormativity; compulsory heterosexuality; research ethics; researcher safety; best practices; South Africa

**Abstract**: In this paper, I investigate the benefits and potential risks associated with utilizing participant observation to gain a deeper understanding of sexual identity. Specifically, my focus is on examining how young, heterosexual, middle-class, cisgender individuals in South Africa perceive and understand their heterosexual identities, exploring how privilege and heteronormativity shape their experiences. In my ethnographic study, I employed various qualitative data collection methods, including participant observation, to analyze how normative practices were negotiated and sustained in contemporary South Africa. As a feminist researcher, I reflect on the epistemological and methodological choices I made in the study, with reflexivity and positionality playing crucial roles in data collection and analysis. Drawing on experiences in three distinct social spaces in Johannesburg—high-end nightclubs, Tupperware-style sex-toy parties, and traditional *braais* [barbecues]—I examine the advantages and challenges of participant observation. This paper contributes to the broader discussion on the method's use, highlighting its potential to offer a nuanced understanding of a normalized phenomenon while acknowledging associated risks.

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## 1. Introduction

> "Why are you doing this? We are born straight [heterosexual] and hence there is no need to investigate it. We need not study these issues because we are who we are *by de facto*. It is only when something is wrong that we want to understand it, like gays and lesbians" (Khethu[1], potential participant, Black English-speaking man, early 20s).

The quote is taken from my fieldnotes and highlights the obstacles I encountered when attempting to recruit participants for my study on how heterosexual identities are shaped within heteronormative spaces. During my conversation with the potential participant, who identified as heterosexual, I explained that I was investigating how young heterosexual individuals shape, experience, and make sense of their heterosexual identities. Upon hearing the topic, he uttered the words above. His response depicted his perception of heterosexuality as a natural and unquestioned construct within a heteronormative society, where other sexual orientations, such as homosexuality, are regarded as problematic or incorrect. Due to the privileged and normative nature of heterosexuality, individuals who identify as heterosexual typically do not scrutinize it, which causes it to be taken for granted. Hence, his reaction spoke to a normative organizing factor in society, namely institutionalized or compulsory heterosexuality, which has been a critical area of investigation for prominent scholars in the field of heterosexual studies over the years (RICH, 1980; WARNER, 1991; WITTIG, 1992), as well as scholars who have produced more recent work on heteronormativity within different spaces (FRANCIS & KUHL, 2022; MAAKE, RUGUNANAN & SMUTS, 2023; MKHIZE & MTHEMBU, 2023). Khethu's attitude toward my study further illustrated the essentialist way in which heterosexual identities has commonly been conceived within numerous social contexts worldwide (STEYN & VAN ZYL, 2009). [1]

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how participant observation can offer a more nuanced understanding of a normative phenomenon under investigation, but that there are nonetheless potential risks researchers may face when conducting this type of research. I focus on my experiences as a participant observer in three different social spaces in Johannesburg, South Africa, i.e., high-end nightclubs, Tupperware-style sex-toy parties, and traditional *braais* [barbecues]. I reflect on both positive and negative aspects of my experiences as a participant observer, highlighting the insights gained through this method. With this paper, I contribute to discussions on qualitative research methodologies, feminist epistemology, and the investigation of a normalized phenomenon. By highlighting some of the benefits and risks associated with participant observation, I align with scholars advocating for immersive research to capture the nuances of everyday life, while emphasizing the importance of reflexivity. [2]

In what follows, I will first provide a brief overview of the nature of heterosexual identities and how it corresponds with decisions around the epistemological ideals of my study. A feminist framework informed my methodological choices, which I

1 The names of all individuals involved in the study, whether they were potential participants or actively took part, were anonymized.

discuss in Section 2 and further reflect on in the section that follows. In the methodology section (Section 3), I highlight the advantages of combining various qualitative data collection methods, including participant observation, to study a topic that is considered normalized and taken for granted. In this section, I also pay close attention to how reflexivity and my own positionality facilitated the data collection process. Thereafter, I present detailed accounts of my experiences as a qualitative fieldworker in the three identified spaces, drawing on the findings they allowed me to generate (Section 4). I end this paper with an overview of what participant observation allowed me to achieve when trying to understand the experiences of a group of young men and women who identified as heterosexual, but who struggled to comprehend this normative sexual identity for themselves (Section 5). [3]

## 2. Framework: Navigating Through a Normalized and Taken-for-Granted Field Using a Feminist Approach

> "The history of 'the heterosexual' lurks *unexamined* not just in our beliefs about our inmost private selves, but also in our beliefs about our bodies, our social interactions, our romances, our family lives, the way we raise our children, and, of course, in our sex lives" (BLANK, 2012, p.12).

Heterosexuality, akin to any sexual identity, encompasses more than mere labels or sexual behaviors and feelings. It involves the construction of norms and roles that prescribe expected behavior, shaping individual and group identities, while invoking a specific sexual-political institution with defined expectations for its members (KATZ, 1990). This construction prompts critical reflection on the deeply ingrained and often unexamined assumptions influencing individual and collective experiences related to heterosexuality. [4]

Feminist and queer scholars have responded by challenging normative and essentialist conceptualizations of heterosexuality, favoring a social constructionist approach that recognizes the diverse meanings and behaviors associated with heterosexual identities. However, the normalized and taken-for-granted nature of heterosexuality nevertheless poses methodological challenges for researchers, necessitating careful consideration in the study's design. Acknowledging that a person's sexual identity is a deeply personal and sensitive matter, it is crucial to approach inquiries with sensitivity. As REDDY and DUNNE (2007, p.162) emphasized, "sexual identities are not clearly observable, are mostly privately held, often sensitive, confused and/or ambiguous, and are not easily accessed by direct questions." Therefore, research inquiries must be designed with these considerations in mind. [5]

The normalization of heterosexuality is a complex and historically rooted construction influenced by various cultural, social, religious, and political factors. Heteronormativity, rooted in societal power structures, assumes heterosexuality as the only acceptable form of sexuality, reinforcing clear gender binaries. WARNER (1999) highlighted several consequences of heteronormativity, including its role in making heterosexuality hegemonic through the process of

normalization and reinforcing gendered power relations. To attain a nuanced understanding of heterosexual identities, researchers must thus identify and explore unexamined aspects that participants may take for granted. [6]

To this end, the qualitative research design of my study was shaped by drawing on a feminist epistemological approach, so I placed significant emphasis on the methodological choices I made in the pursuit of knowledge production. When connecting feminist theory with the practice of conducting fieldwork, researchers guided by this thought demonstrate an equal concern for both the research process and the data they are gathering (CLEMONS, 2019). These considerations are informed by several feminist tenets which formed an integral part of how I approached this study's methodology. [7]

First, by using a feminist methodology, the lived experiences of participants are foregrounded which links the meanings and interpretations attached to individual experiences to the phenomenon under study (TAMALE, 2011). This resonates with broader feminist debates, notably advanced by influential scholars within Black feminist thought such as COLLINS (2000) and LORDE (2012) who advocated for the significance of lived experiences as a criterion of meaning. Feminist researchers subsequently seek to illustrate the value of comprehending diverse perspectives and meanings through the utilization of various methodological approaches (KIGUWA, 2019). [8]

Second, feminist researchers strive to steer clear of objectifying participants and adopting hierarchical representations of knowledge. Instead, they create a space where the authentic voices of participants become integral to the knowledge-creation process (TAMALE, 2011). In line with this, drawing from the intersection between Black feminist thought and qualitative research, researchers aim to form partnerships with participants in an effort to actively initiate dialogue (CLEMONS, 2019). This collaborative engagement empowers participants to recollect and attribute meaning to their experiences, both past and present (ibid.). The emphasis is on fostering a participatory and inclusive approach that values the voices and perspectives of those involved in the research process. [9]

Third, feminist researchers acknowledge that neutrality and objectivity in research is impossible and employ reflexivity in practice (KIGUWA, 2019). Feminist research challenges the relationship between the researcher and the researched and emphasizes questions around representation and reflexivity while paying close attention to the specificities of identity and power relations (PILLOW & MAYO, 2012). In this way, reflexivity becomes central before, during, and after data collection, as well as during the analysis of participants' narratives. It allows for the recognition that one's position affects one's knowledge (HERBERT, 2000). Reflexivity, then, enables researchers to critically address their own positionality in the field and the ways in which their research has an impact on the lives of others beyond the research (MILLORA, MAIMUNAH & STILL, 2020). [10]

Finally, intersectionality has become a valuable tool in feminist research by enabling investigators to explore the complicated interweaving and construction

of different identity markers. It challenges the notion of fixed or essentialist social identities (CRENSHAW, 1991), asserting that all identity categories are socially constructed. Originating from the 1980s feminist movement, intersectional thinkers initially aimed to examine the power dynamics among marginalized groups, especially in response to the multiple oppressions faced by Black women based on race, class, and gender (COLLINS, 2000). In recent years, a growing trend within the social sciences has positioned intersectionality as a framework not only to examine minority groups but also to scrutinize social groups considered privileged (DHAMOON, 2011; LEVINE-RASKY, 2011; YUVAL-DAVIS, 2011). Advocates argue that mainstreaming intersectionality offers a theoretical space to capture the experiences of dominant groups, disrupting conventional notions of power and providing nuanced insights into privileged identities. Consequently, intersectionality allows scholars to approach the complexities of lived realities and facilitates a space for struggle across differences (LEVINE-RASKY, 2011, p.243). [11]

Bearing these feminist tenets in mind, I approached the research participants as agents in shaping and making sense of their own sexual identities. Many insights into the lived experiences of the participants were gained through extensive participant observation. A benefit of using participant observation is that it gives ethnographers the opportunity to gather empirical insights into social practices that are normally "hidden" from the public gaze (REEVES, KUPER & HODGES, 2008, p.514), while observing the processes that take place when participants make sense of their own identity developments. This method also allowed me to witness practices and interactions firsthand, which I could not gain from interviews alone, as the interviews only provided for the participants' own verbal reports of how they behave. "Immersing" oneself in various social settings thus helps in generating rich understandings of social actions and their nuances in different contexts (HERBERT, 2000; REEVES et al., 2008). According to DAVID and SUTTON (2010), spending an extended period with participants in the field further allows the researcher to be involved in their rituals and events, as was the case in my study. During all these interactions, I was privy to the young people's stories and gossip, which make up their everyday lives. Participant observation, therefore, enabled me to observe heterosexual and gendered performances in specific situations and spaces, as well as how this (privileged) sexuality was performed and experienced by these young people. This also required extensive preparation on my part, with a particular focus on a critical self-reflection on my positionality. [12]

## 3. Methodology: Heterosexual Identities Under Investigation

To explore the conceptualization and experiences of heterosexual identities among 18 to 28-year-old Black and White, middle-class, heterosexual cisgender men and women in Johannesburg, South Africa, I utilized multiple data collection techniques. These included four group interviews (KRUEGER & CASEY, 2015), a series of in-depth interviews (PATTON, 2014) with 15 research participants, and extensive participant observation (DAVID & SUTTON, 2010) over a three-year period (2013 to 2015). This prolonged research timeframe also facilitated in building up trusting relationships with participants who had different racial identities than myself, which fostered a richer understanding of the participants' diverse experiences and perspectives. [13]

Based on the study's selection criteria, the participants had to self-identify as heterosexual, and fall within the middle-class and age range specified. The decision to include middle-class voices in the study was driven by the aim to address a research gap in the existing literature on heterosexuality in South Africa which predominantly focuses on lower socio-economic groups. I recognized the significant role of the younger middle-class generation in redefining (hetero)sexual identities amidst shifting social and political dynamics. Ultimately, in studying middle class participants, I was able to gain insights into how the privilege afforded to these wealthier groups influenced their agency in constructing their heterosexual identities with greater freedom compared to individuals within less-privileged socio-economic classes. By employing purposive sampling techniques, I strategically selected individuals who matched the predetermined criteria for inclusion in the study. This method allowed me to access participants who represented the specific characteristics essential for the research objectives, thereby enhancing the validity of the findings (PATTON, 2014). I also attempted to include participants from various cultural and racial backgrounds in order to ensure inclusion of the experiences of individuals from diverse backgrounds. [14]

Initially, I assumed that my own middle-class and heterosexual identity would facilitate participant recruitment. However, many potential participants were uncomfortable discussing their sexual identity, highlighting the personal and sensitive nature of the topic. I did not intend to prioritize sexual acts but instead I was interested in examining how normalized and privileged sexual *identities* are constructed. Some participants questioned the importance of studying heterosexuality, perceiving it as "normal" and "problem-free," and thus not worthy of research attention, highlighting the challenges of researching a privileged and normalized sexual identity. For instance, as illustrated in the opening quote of this paper, one potential participant exclaimed that there was no need to study heterosexuality as it was "normal" and there is "nothing wrong with it," and that research is only needed when studying a "problematic" identity such as homosexuality. [15]

The initial in-depth interviews revealed that the participants had difficulty conceptualizing what being heterosexual meant to them, as they had never

critically examined that before. Most participants regarded heterosexuality as a mere unquestionable sexual preference and were unaware of how their everyday experiences were linked to their privileged sexual identity. HOCKEY, MEAH and ROBINSON (2007) attributed this difficulty to the status of heterosexuality as an invisible and "common-sense" identity, further speaking to the normative nature of heterosexuality. As a result, I had to continually adapt my approach to uncover how heterosexuality functioned as an identity in their lives. An ethnographic approach was essential in this endeavor because the researcher has limited control over certain aspects of the interview and cannot force participants to engage in self-critique (PERERA, 2020). Therefore, it is the researcher's responsibility to employ appropriate research methods which collect meaningful data that accurately represent the participants' lived realities, even if they are not consciously aware of it. [16]

Through participant observation, group interviews, and in-depth interviews, I was able to overcome the challenge of understanding how the participants conceptualized their heterosexual identities. The combination of these data collection methods allowed me to pay close attention to the meanings constructed during social interactions, which in turn helped me uncover the knowledge and meaning structures that the participants took for granted. The data analysis process thus involved combining the results from both the extensive field notes maintained during data collection and the verbatim transcripts generated from the individual and group interviews. Through a thematic analysis approach, informed by BRAUN and CLARKE's (2006) arguments, significant themes and patterns were identified. I reviewed the notes and transcripts several times, extracting key excerpts and noting both similarities and differences in the participants' responses. Based on the tenets of feminist epistemologies, I prioritized amplifying the subjective voices of participants and recognizing intersecting dynamics of identity, power, and privilege. This method allowed me to uncover the complex constructions of participants' (hetero)sexual identities. [17]

Participant observation, however, proved invaluable in gaining insights into the lived experiences of the participants as it enabled me to observe practices and interactions firsthand that were normally hidden from the public gaze (HERBERT, 2000). Consequently, I developed a rich understanding of social actions and their subtleties across various contexts by being involved in the participants' rituals and events. As previous scholars have articulated, immersing oneself in diverse social settings through participant observation entails careful consideration of both its advantages and limitations. The intricacies of human experience introduce a level of complexity that challenges the conventional distinctions between insider and outsider roles (DAVIS & CRAVEN, 2022; MILLORA et al., 2020). Moreover, the positionalities of ethnographers are inherently ambiguous, presenting both advantages and disadvantages in the research process (DAVIS & CRAVEN, 2022). To navigate these complexities, I diligently kept comprehensive journals, capturing not only the empirical data but also my reflective thoughts. This approach served as a methodical means to scrutinize and refine my interpretation and analysis while upholding the authentic voices of the participants. This deliberate effort ensured that my subjective perspectives did not overshadow the

participants' voices and that knowledge was produced collaboratively. Throughout the study, my positionality became an integral lens through which the findings were shaped, as I will illustrate in this paper. [18]

Perhaps the most compelling impact was my own gendered and sexual identity as a heterosexual cisgender woman during the recruitment and data collection stages. As an illustration, during the initial week of the recruitment stage, I endeavored to recruit heterosexual male participants, and the following occurred:

> "Off to a bad start, I feel ... Tonight I met three White English guys at Thembi's[2]. I started a conversation with them at the bar. They told me that they were all 23 years old. Introduced myself and told them that I was conducting a PhD study (broadly) focusing on heterosexuality. Barely a second after I said heterosexuality they started laughing and screaming loudly: 'Ooooh! Sex! You must have the best job in the world if you are studying that!' I tried to explain to them that I am looking at identity rather than the act of sex, but they were saying inappropriate things to me ... At least, I think they were. They were asking me a number of questions. Like, which research methods I would use to study this (with winks ... as if they thought there would be actual sexual acts between them and me). If I had a boyfriend ... If I ever get lonely ... All sexual innuendos, I felt. I felt very uncomfortable" (Field notes, August 19, 2012). [19]

This is merely one description of many that I encountered throughout this ethnographic study from some heterosexual men, many of whom were only interested in pursuing sexual liaisons and therefore could not be included in the study. However, as CUPPLES (2002, p.384) suggested, the fieldwork period can provide "a unique setting in which heterosexual researchers can examine heterosexuality." For instance, being construed as an object of desire by the members of the research community can be useful in the quest to understand how identities are constructed (ibid.). In my case, this experience provided insight into how these young men perceived me as a straight woman and potential sexual partner, which pointed to gendered power dynamics and toxic masculinity. Not being able to include these men in the study can possibly be seen as a limitation, as their voices would have contributed significantly towards the study topic; however, I prioritized my safety and comfort in the moment. [20]

These reflections emphasize that the fieldwork process is not an isolated endeavor, and that it is always gendered. Regardless of whether the researcher identifies as male or female, the fieldworker is inherently perceived through a gendered lens, influencing the entire fieldwork process, whether subtly or in more overt ways. This can manifest in various forms, including instances of violence, e.g., CONGDON's (2015) exploration of being a female ethnographer in the field and being exposed to instances of sexual harassment, and more recently, SHARABI's (2022) account as a male ethnographer facing sexual harassment during fieldwork. Moreover, this discussion raised a frequently overlooked concern: The safety of researchers during fieldwork. KLOß (2017) contended that social research training often neglects to adequately prepare early-career

2 Thembi's (pseudonym) is a popular restaurant/pub in a middle-class neighborhood in the north of Johannesburg where I recruited the participants.

researchers for addressing and navigating gendered and sexualized harassment. The author advocated for methodological training that encourages new researchers to reflect on the gendered dynamics and contextual power relations they may encounter during fieldwork. [21]

Aligned with being cognizant of the gendered dynamics and contextual power relations within the field, I found that space, too, held significant importance and greatly informed my own experience while doing fieldwork. The following excerpt from my field notes shows how the physical location where alcohol is served could have also contributed to the interactions that took place:

> "He was here last night with the girl I chatted with ... the one who is studying Art. They were boyfriend and girlfriend. Or so it seemed. Tonight, this guy was there without her. He remembered me and came over with a shot of [name of an alcoholic drink]. I told him that I have had enough to drink and that I still need to drive home. He seemed uninterested. He put his hand on my shoulder and started playing with my bra strap. I asked him where his girlfriend was this evening and he said that he often goes out alone at night, just to feel like he is not strapped down by one lady. He continued to fondle my bra strap and bite his lower lip, at which stage I got annoyed and decided to leave. He was stumbling around like a drunken buffoon trying to persuade me to stay, but I would not have it" (Field notes, June 22, 2012). [22]

The young man I mention above made sexual advances towards me, seemingly without fear of any negative repercussions. This went hand in hand with his alcohol consumption. If this had taken place in another setting, such as a university for instance, he might have acted differently. It also raised the question of whether or not his girlfriend went out without him as well or if this was just reserved for him. These types of experiences had an impact on the analysis of how heterosexuality played out in certain social settings among straight men and women, which ultimately led to more enriched conceptualizations based on first-hand experiences. Having said that, the fieldwork phase was often a degrading and difficult task. Maintaining a clear focus on the study's objectives and acknowledging what these experiences contributed to the data analysis was what motivated me. However, this perseverance was not without struggles as I grappled with self-doubt and diminished self-confidence, particularly given that these challenges emerged early in the fieldwork phase. This internal struggle is reminiscent of CONGDON's (2015, p.19) reflections on her experience as a "lone female" in the field. She pointed out that researchers may unintentionally internalize unpleasant interactions, leading them to question their capacity to fulfill the fundamental task of research. Despite the difficulties encountered, the awareness of how these challenges may contribute to the broader research goals helped me navigate through moments of doubt and maintain a sense of purpose in the fieldwork process. [23]

On other occasions during the ethnographic study, my gender as a woman interviewing men had positive results. The young men who eventually agreed to participate in this study claimed that they felt like they were able to share personal views with me that they would not easily have shared with their male

friends. Subsequently, I was fortunate to have been privy to many conversations among the men which were intended for "men only." Similarly, being female was often an advantage when engaging with other women, which I elaborate on in the following sections on nightclubs and Tupperware-style sex-toy parties. Mostly though, the female participants felt a strong need to comment on my own gender and heterosexual representation. These comments often focused on my physical appearance and its connection to heterosexual sex and relationships. They suggested that if I wore more makeup, high heels, and dressed sexier ("like a girl"), I would be able to attract a man. There were instances where they would utter words such as, "How are you going to find a guy looking like that?" or "Which guy will ever fuck you if you look like that?" Such comments gave me a glimpse into the emphasis that participants placed on a specifically constructed physical appearance in line with performing heterosexuality. However, these comments contradicted the fact that men still showed interest in me despite not conforming to the idealized heterosexual femininity. Some participants also labeled my attire as "un-ladylike" and assumed I was a lesbian, showcasing the complex yet one-dimensional nature of participants' perceptions of identities and sexuality. These encounters highlighted the importance that participants placed on visual or physical signs of difference (SULTANA, 2007), but also encouraged discussions on gender roles, femininities, masculinities, heterosexuality, and relationships. Ultimately, my own gendered and sexual identity acted as a catalyst for exploring taken-for-granted issues and sharing experiences and ideas on heterosexuality. [24]

## 4. Findings: Entering the Field as a Participant Observer

Much of my fieldwork and observations took place in social-gathering places within typical middle-class suburbs of Johannesburg. Specifically, I spent a lot of time in semi-affluent northern areas of the city that were popular among young, middle-class heterosexual men and women. These geographical settings were deliberately chosen to access the middle-class heterosexual population for the study. Though recruitment occurred in these social settings, the specified spaces discussed in this paper became the fieldwork sites based on the participants' guidance. [25]

While I identify as a cisgender, heterosexual woman, my appearance often deviated from traditional markers of femininity, such as wearing makeup or high heels. This caused my own bodily appearance to clash with the views that research participants held about gender performances, but also provided significant insights into how heterosexual men and women shaped their own gendered and (hetero)sexual identities in line with heteronormative societal expectations. Throughout my time spent conducting fieldwork, I learned to embrace uncomfortable moments while simultaneously allowing for stories to unfold. In the field, I thus gained valuable information from direct reactions and interactions with participants. For instance, one evening at a popular hangout spot, a young Black woman named Nikiwe, who appeared to be in her mid-20s and was somewhat tipsy, approached me at my table with a cocktail in hand. She remarked, "Girlfriend, I see you here all the time, and there is no way you are

going to pick up a guy looking like that!" I explained to her that I was at the pub regularly for research purposes, not to pick up a man. Our conversation continued, and what follows is my loose interpretation of what we discussed:

> "Letitia: What makes you think that I am trying to pick someone up?
>
> Nikiwe: You always sit here alone.
>
> Letitia: Fair enough [I smile]. What should I look like then?
>
> Nikiwe: Definitely show more cleavage. Men like 'sexy' and a bit of skin. [It was at this stage that I noticed her appearance. She wore an extremely low-cut shirt, lots of make-up and she had very stylish braids]. And don't wear your glasses! And wear make-up. And do something about that ponytail" (Field notes, March 22, 2013). [26]

Nikiwe formed a negative impression of my outfit, believing that it would not attract men, and proceeded to critique my appearance based on traditional feminine markers. She then invited me to join her and a group of her mid-20s Black female friends, who also weighed in on the conversation. They all agreed that my choice of *tekkies* (sneakers), coupled with my age (I was 31 years old at the time), would not help me attract male attention and labeled them as a marker of lower socio-economic class. I felt self-conscious after this encounter, as my footwear had inadvertently become a symbol of my sexual appeal and social standing. It was striking that Nikiwe, a stranger at the time, felt the need to comment on my appearance, attributing my clothing, lack of makeup and hairstyle to my supposed unattractiveness to straight men. The issue of my appearance and dress style instigated many conversations throughout my time in the field. At the same time, it distinguished me as an outsider. Regardless, the participants allowed me into their world (often with some conditions) that led to a series of observations which informed the findings of this study, as the next sub-sections will illustrate. [27]

### 4.1 Nightclubs

Observing interactions between men and women in nightclubs which are known to be sexualized spaces, yielded significant conclusions. My observations, however, often began when the participants were preparing to go out clubbing, resulting in what I refer to as "straight bodies on display" as they were consciously preparing to appear physically attractive to the opposite sex before going out to a nightclub. On one occasion, with a group of Black female participants, my status as an insider and outsider was clearly ambiguous. While my identity as a straight female insider organically led to many insights on contemporary gendered and heterosexual identities, this happened in line with the consensus that I did not entirely meet the expectations of what a straight woman going out clubbing *should* look like, raising doubts about my supposed insider status. The following passage is an excerpt from my field notes, documented after a visit to the home of one of my participants, Noni, before accompanying her and her friends to a nightclub.

> "Noni and a group of other friends are getting ready for the evening out. Noni is standing in front of a full-length mirror admiring her outfit. Two of her friends are lying on the bed giggling about something while drinking red wine. I make my way through a pile of clothes and shoes towards Noni to greet her. Bridget hands me a glass of wine and invites me to sit on the edge of the bed, but before I can sit, Noni exclaims, 'What the hell are you wearing?' I was dressed smart-casual, as Noni had requested, wearing black jeggings and black pumps, a grey shirt, and a silver necklace. I had ironed my hair and put on a bit of make-up for the occasion. 'Eish [a common expression in South Africa which refers to disapproval or surprise], you White girls have no style!' she jokingly states. 'How are you going to pick up a guy looking like that?' I assured her that that was not my intention for going out with them. My comment goes unheard as the young Black women, all in their early 20s, continue to tell me that I should look a specific way when going out to a nightclub. They tell me that I should show more cleavage, wear high heels and lots of jewelry, apply more make-up and preferably wear a skirt. In unison, they all scream, 'Make-over!' They then proceeded to dig through piles of clothes lying on the bed and on the floor in search of a more 'appropriate' outfit for me. All the dresses and skirts they suggested were exceptionally short since I was generally a lot taller than all the women there were, so I refused to wear any of it. We eventually settle on a tight red blouse that shows just the right amount of cleavage, according to them, while keeping my jeggings on. They put a bulk of gold necklaces and armbands on me, where after they applied more eyeshadow and teased my hair slightly to make it look more 'poofy,' as they call it. They then told me to ditch my pumps and try on a pair of Noni's high heels. Noni was delighted to hear that we were the same shoe size. I consequently wore a pair of her blue stiletto heels. I looked at myself in the mirror, slightly wobbly from trying to balance on the stilettos, and they all said, 'That's more like it!'" (Field notes, March 23, 2013) [28]

Their assertions of how a woman should dress when going to clubs were partly based on the dress codes that each nightclub adhered to. Two of the nightclubs we frequented during the extensive data collection phase had the following signs at their entrances: "The club has the right of admission to refuse entrance to anyone who does not abide by the strict dress code. Women and men are not allowed to wear *tekkies* [sneakers]." The dress code at another club was even more restrictive and notably gendered, stating "No flats [flat shoes] for women. Men must wear collared shirts." However, the care that went into dressing in "a particular way" went beyond the prescribed dress codes of these establishments. The male and female participants who visited clubs went to great lengths to create an impression that, in their view, would appeal to the opposite sex, often accentuating their gendered identities. What was significant of this meet-up with Noni and her friends, presented in the excerpt above, was their immediate reaction to what was acceptable of a woman's (sexual) appearance. Their thoughts on my appearance mostly related to their views on how attractive I would look to the opposite sex. It was also important to me to partake in this "make-over" session, as it allowed me to experience their clubbing rituals from their point of view. [29]

At these predominantly straight nightclubs, flirting often occurred in a tactile manner on the dance floor, with men holding women around their waists or women dancing provocatively with their female friends to arouse men's attention and fantasies. The female participants in Qian Hui TAN's (2013) study compared this to a form of foreplay. In my study, two White female participants, Vanessa and Adele, would often get drunk, climb onto the bar, and grind up against each other while dancing seductively. They would also pull each other's skirts up slightly to reveal their legs, as they believed that showing off skin was a way in which to grab men's attention. There were times, however, when the above-mentioned two participants would be so drunk that their flirtatious moves on the dance floor and on top of the bar, resulted in them clumsily falling around and laughing hysterically. This did not deter men from hitting on them, but instead encouraged them to pursue interactions with them. A male participant noted that: "The drunker the girl, the *easier* she becomes." It thus became evident that not only do "tipsy" women become increasingly more sensual through their bodies, which men seemingly appreciated, but also that men often felt that it made it easier to "pick them up." However, one evening Vanessa and Adele became tremendously drunk and men began hovering over them and wanting to take them home. I was left torn about the actions I should or should not take. As researchers, it is our responsibility to adhere to ethical research guidelines to prevent participants (as well as researchers) from experiencing any physical or psychological harm (McCOSKER, BARNARD & GERBER, 2001). Yet, I was not in a controlled research setting, and I was uncertain whether to remain impartial or alleviate the situation. One of the principles of ethnographic research, in fact, is observing participants in their "natural" setting. However, the reality of living in a country with high levels of gender-based violence overshadowed my position as an ethnographer, and I intervened by ushering them to an Uber. [30]

Vanessa and Adele later told me that such incidents were common and did not bother them, as they wanted their sexual needs met by going home with a man. However, I was left questioning how they saw themselves as sexual beings and how they felt the need to get men's attention in these spaces. They had an oblivious view about the men who frequented these spaces, believing that only "decent men" went there and that they were not in any danger. This incident opened important lines of questioning during the fieldwork process about gendered identities and sexual behavior in high-end nightclub spaces and beyond. [31]

During the fieldwork phase as a participant observer, I was also constantly aware of my own physical safety, particularly when it took place at night or in spaces where alcohol consumption was high. Unfortunately, I experienced several instances of unwanted groping while standing at the nightclub bars or on the dancefloor, and once, a man even followed me into the women's rest room and attempted to force me into a cubicle pulling on my clothes. Fortunately, the club's bouncer noticed the man entering the rest room, intervened and prevented any further harm from occurring. One male participant in the study attempted to justify this behavior by suggesting that women who go to nightclubs are inviting it upon themselves. This narrative is problematic and perpetuates harmful ideas that

women are responsible for their own victimization. Additionally, it was concerning to note that some men felt entitled to behave inappropriately towards women who frequented these spaces. [32]

After the traumatic rest room incident, I felt unsafe and demotivated to continue with my fieldwork. However, as my PhD studies required continuous fieldwork, I briefly employed a male postgraduate student to accompany me to these spaces. While this made me feel safer, it changed the dynamics of attending these clubs, especially since the female participants found my fieldworker to be charming and handsome leading to some flirtatious interactions from their side. This points to the type of (heterosexual) experiences the women wanted to engage in within these spaces, but ultimately, I decided to end my fieldwork in these nightclubs as I found it difficult to justify this change in dynamics while trying to write an ethnographic account on the topic. Simultaneously, I found myself deeply affected by this incident, and needed to prioritize my own mental well-being. Making this decision was not easy, given the immense pressure to successfully complete my PhD studies. KLOß (2017) rightly emphasized that researchers are often inadequately trained to anticipate the types of situations they might encounter in the field, and they may lack guidance on when it is necessary to interrupt fieldwork. This experience taught me a valuable lesson in that the fieldwork process is inherently one of trial-and-error, and despite any amount of methodological training, one cannot be fully prepared for every circumstance. Having said that, I wish that my training had focused more deliberately on first-hand experiences in the field which could have *empowered* me to make informed choices in pursuit of knowledge, without the burden of guilt and uncertainty that accompanied those decisions. [33]

### 4.2 Tupperware-style sex-toy parties

During the fieldwork phase I also had the opportunity to attend five Tupperware-style sex-toy parties with some of my primary female participants, all of which were attended exclusively by White women. These sex-toy parties resembled Tupperware parties from the 1950s and which were greatly popular until the 1990s, showcasing products for direct sales. However, in this unique contemporary iteration, the focus shifted away from plasticware to be used in the kitchen to an array of products geared toward enhancing women's romantic and sexual lives, including sex toys, lubricants, and lingerie. In her ethnographic study on these sex-toy parties in the United States, CURTIS (2004) emphasized how this industry shapes female sexual identities and desires, fostering a culture that encourages sexual exploration and innovation. [34]

In another publication, I delve into the findings that emerged from my observations at these parties (SMUTS, 2023). In brief, these findings revealed that the female partygoers' understanding of (hetero)sex and their intimate relationships with men were deeply entwined with various heteronormative discourses prevalent in society. Furthermore, their conceptions of themselves as heterosexual individuals were shaped by their intersecting identity markers such as race, gender, class, and religion. Ultimately, the main conclusion drawn was

that there are limitations—self-imposed and external—to how these women felt they can be sexual. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will focus on how my positionality as a participant observer enabled me to develop insights into the ways in which a group of White, middle-class South African women experience their heterosexual identities and sexual agency. [35]

To start, the parties were held in the women's (the host's) private homes, which immediately set a tone of exclusivity for women. The host would typically decorate the living room with pink balloons and feather boas, creating the (normative gendered) impression that these spaces are traditionally meant for women only. The saleswomen from the sex-toy companies would set up a table to display their products, which included dildos, vibrators, lubricants, massage oils, and scented candles. The packaging of the products often featured romantic colors such as red or pink, with hearts and roses. Again, the intention is to appeal to women, create a safe space, and have sex acts feel less "dirty" (ibid.). [36]

Despite the efforts to create a safe and inviting environment, many of the partygoers expressed discomfort and embarrassment at the sight of the sex toys, giggling nervously. This reaction was not unique to the attendees, as I myself felt a similar sense of discomfort and embarrassment.

> "I feel so silly! I am supposed to be more enlightened than this, I am all for female sexual pleasure, but I felt so uncomfortable. Embarrassed even...*why*? It is weird, but the talks about sex and what turns men on did not bother me—it was the toys. This is just *one* way of getting sexual pleasure. But I think it was not a way I have ever really explored before myself" (Field notes, January 25, 2014). [37]

I was surprised by my initial reaction to the sex toys on display and found myself giggling and blushing with the rest of the partygoers. This reaction was completely involuntary and certainly came from an unfamiliar place of discomfort or, as one participant noted: "It is like we were doing something *naughty* or that we are not supposed to do." As I mentioned in my fieldnotes, this is just one way of being sexual. Yet, embracing this meant having to deal with certain societal judgments and double standards. Of course, these concepts were of interest to me in my study in order to formulate what it meant for heterosexual women to gain and embrace their sexual agency. [38]

While being exposed to sex toys was something that made me feel uncomfortable at the time, the significance of these parties for the purposes of this study did not only originate from the toys themselves or from their unfamiliarity to me and the other attendees, but rather in the messages that were being conveyed. The salespeople emphasized that self-pleasure is a natural and acceptable aspect of sexuality, and that these products can be enjoyed in private, either alone or with male sexual partners. This message often conflicted with what the women had been taught about sexual pleasure, particularly when it came to self-pleasure. After observing and later interviewing several female partygoers, a few common themes arose, including a sense of societal shame and embarrassment surrounding sex toys, seen as foreign objects, and the

conflicting beliefs around what constitutes sexual fulfillment for women. Though there were clear generational differences between me and the participants, we had similar racial identities and upbringings in terms of schooling and religious teachings (as I am also a white, Afrikaans-speaking woman). During our upbringings, religion was often used as a tool to legitimize a respectable type of female agency to "keep women in their place." We were taught to be decent; we were told that sexual pleasure is reserved for men, and that self-pleasure was taboo. This aligns with VAN DER WESTHUIZEN's (2017) research on White middle-class Afrikaans women and the concept of decency, highlighting the influence of cultural norms on the perception of women's behavior. Instances of transgressions typically had to align with societal moralities surrounding gendered expectations for women (ibid.). [39]

Being confronted with my own inhibitions and biases towards sex and how women are "supposed" to act, became a catalyst to explore heterosexual women's deep-seated attitudes toward sex. I then used this revelation to explore similarities and differences between myself and my participants in an effort to develop a critical argument regarding women's inhibited conceptions around their sexualities. Ultimately, experiencing these parties in person and being reflexive of these experiences allowed me to relate to the participants better and, more importantly, it forced me to be critical of the societal discourses that dictate and regulate women's behaviors and acts. This was done while continuously reflecting on the number of intersecting forces and identity markers that have shaped my own life, as well as the participants' lives. Had I not had access to these kinds of parties—which was out of my comfort zone—through the method of participant observation, I would not have been able to understand the extent to which women's sexual limitations are governed by external forces under the male gaze. At the same time, the personal reflections about my own positionality were pivotal in formulating conclusions about the topic at hand. Ultimately, having to grapple with the meanings attached to being a sexual woman had its scholarly advantages. I found myself able to present robust arguments based on the mundane and taken-for-granted forces that shape so many women's lives and sexual identities, including my own. [40]

### 4.3 The traditional *braai*

Although the previous two settings were not places I would typically frequent in my personal life, the subsequent setting of a *braai* felt distinctly familiar to me. The traditional South African *braai* is a significant cultural event and beloved pastime in my country. Although barbecues are popular in many countries, South Africa takes it to another level—so much so that National Heritage Day (a public holiday on September 24) has been informally dubbed National *Braai* Day. Growing up in South Africa as I did, meant that one would have experienced numerous *braais* over the years. Consequently, certain perceptions have formed about the enacted norms that transpire at such events. These norms often involve gendered roles and activities that men and women undertake when hosting or attending a traditional *braai*. [41]

Throughout the three years of conducting this study, I was frequently invited to plenty of *braais* by the research participants which was not surprising given the high regard and importance that many South Africans attribute to these events. The objective of this study was to gain insight into the experiences of young heterosexual men and women in present-day South Africa, with a particular focus on investigating how heteronormativity is sustained and propagated within these groups. Accordingly, the space of a traditional South African *braai* became a vehicle through which to study contemporary enactments of gender roles among straight young people in society. Moreover, it afforded me a valuable opportunity to directly observe how normality operates amongst and within different groups of young cisgender men and women. Witnessing firsthand how these norms are established, asserted, and justified was truly beneficial to the formulation of my arguments on the topic under study. [42]

I drew on my own personal experiences of attending *braais* over the years to inform the questions I asked and the nature of the discussions I had with participants in order to explore (hetero)normative practices. This reflexive exercise thus meant that I had to ask myself critical questions about *what* "normal" meant to me; *why* I considered this to be "normal"; and *who* shaped my views around this so-called normality. Simultaneously, I asked the participants the same questions in an effort to view the space, and the enacted behaviors and conversations that took place within it, through their perspectives. At virtually all the *braais* I attended during the fieldwork phase, it was almost like there was some unwritten rule that within this space, there would be a clear gendered divide. Women were rendered to the kitchen to prepare side-dishes, while the men prepared the meat and socialized around the grill. This was evident across all the gatherings I attended where exclusively heterosexual men and women were present. The only exception were instances where there were a mixture of heterosexual and non-heterosexual individuals attending a *braai*, which somehow leveled the playing field. [43]

The participants had very specific ideas about what a traditional *braai* would entail and, more specifically, what heterosexual men and women's roles are at a *braai*. These descriptions were not limited to the participants' views on the roles of men and women at *braais* only. Many felt that within broader society it was necessary to have distinct roles along gender lines and that they encouraged this form of (hetero)normative ordering to maintain a state of harmony. This form of normality, then, shows how certain groups of privileged individuals use their hegemonic power to construct society in their image (VAN DER WESTHUIZEN, 2017). Some utterances to this effect are as follow:

> "Man make fire. Woman make salad" (Fieldnotes 2013, Amy, White Afrikaans-speaking woman, 21 years old).
>
> "The division of labor is so distinct. It's not even discussed. It automatically happens this way. It is normal" (Fieldnotes 2013, Anna, Black Afrikaans-speaking woman, 22 years old).

> "This is how it has always been—why rock the boat?" (Fieldnotes 2013, Spencer, White English-speaking man, early 20s).
>
> "The quintessential roles are still there. People still like men to be dominant. And all men like it to be dominant. This is the way things have always been done" (Fieldnotes 2014, Colby, Black English-speaking man, 28 years old).
>
> "The roles have been a little bit mixed up but we haven't changed our programming. Men still want girls that can cook. Women still want men that can provide" (Fieldnotes 2013, Colby, Black English-speaking man, 28 years old).
>
> "We have a pre-described role system. I mean—women do it, and men do it. Even though it is becoming more blended these days, it is still where we go. Men are more physical and do more physical stuff, and women are more emotional. It is not necessarily so, but it is how we were all raised. It is basically your idea of how you have to be" (Interview 2014, Tiaan, White Afrikaans-speaking man, 24 years old). [44]

Overall, through my observations and conversations at various *braais*, I learned that many men and women were content with the conventional gendered norms they have been socialized into, and they rarely question them—which further contributes to heteronormativity remaining intact. This is not unlike what WARNER (1991, 1999) argued in his seminal work on the nature of heteronormativity, emphasizing that societal adherence to established gender norms often operates as an unquestioned and ingrained aspect of social life, perpetuating the endurance of heteronormative structures. In short, these exposures once again revealed that the participants in my study were not opposed to adhering to certain normalized gendered stereotypes, and often reinforced them. [45]

As mentioned earlier, participant observation made it possible for me to be amid various conversations amongst both the male and female participants. Though I cannot go into too much detail in this paper, the setting of a *braai* with its social ambiance, provided a rich context for observing the nuances of language, content of gossip, and the selective sharing of information among participants along gendered lines. These observations and discussions revealed significant information that provided insights into how heterosexual men and women interacted with each other and within their own gender groups. For instance, conversations amongst the women in the kitchen tended to revolve around gossiping about other women, relationships, and shopping, while conversations among men around the fire focused on subjects such as sex, attractive women, and sport. One of the benefits of being a participant observer, having an understanding with the research participants, and having built up a rapport over time, then, was that I was also allowed into the male conversations. During interactions with the male participants, I observed a tendency for them to use derogatory language towards women or assert their hetero-masculinity through talks about their involvement in aggressive sports. This behavior was rationalized to me as a method for them to "separate the *real* men from the *moffies* [a derogatory South African slang word referring to a homosexual man, similar to the term 'faggot']." SHEFER and RUITERS (1998) explained that this type of derogatory naming is a means through which South African men regain their

masculine power, and the male participants at these *braais* unapologetically acknowledged it. Despite the forthrightness in their expressions, it was evident that my role as a female researcher was recognized, prompting them to offer explanations for their behavior, indicating a heightened awareness of my presence as an observer. [46]

## 5. Discussion and Concluding Thoughts

TAMALE (2011, p.28) argued that "[a] good sexuality research project does not view methodology as a mere appendage of issues of epistemology or 'a way of carrying out an enquiry'." Rather, methodology is an important part of theory building and transformative change. In my investigation, I was aware that when researchers embark on a study of normalized identities, they risk overlooking specific nuances due to the taken-for-granted nature of the identity. Therefore, selecting appropriate methodological approaches and data collection methods became crucial in capturing the participants' lived experiences. [47]

In this paper, I argue that participant observation is a vital data collection method for uncovering meanings and behaviors that are seldom questioned. This method should align with the researcher's positionality and the practice of reflexivity in qualitative research. Although many feminist/sexuality researchers aim to disrupt or dismantle "the norm," it first requires a comprehensive understanding of how heteronormativity and normalization function in order to address it. Thus, maintaining detailed fieldnotes is essential, as it enables critical reflection during data analysis and allows the researcher to weave together complex normalized behaviors, as I have illustrated in this paper. [48]

The exploration of diverse social spaces in Johannesburg expands on the impact of the paper, shedding light on the intersecting dimensions shaping normative behaviors and identities. The participants' understandings and expressions of their (hetero)sexual identities were closely linked to the private and public spaces they inhabited. Their expressions of (hetero)sexuality often shifted based on the geographical location and the people present in that space. From a sociological perspective, a space derives its meaning from the people who contribute to its creation. Those in positions of power often influence the definition of space, since individuals possess the ability to reshape and redefine it through their own inhabitations (MKHIZE & MTHEMBU, 2023). The participants were found to shape the very spaces they inhabited, often unconsciously. In some cases, these spaces acted as barriers to (hetero)sexual expression, informing and reinforcing socially acceptable ways of performing heterosexuality, such as what was acceptable to discuss at sex-toy parties and what was not. In doing so, the individuals determined who are included and who are excluded in these spaces based on their behaviors (ibid.). In other cases, spaces can facilitate the breakdown of restrictions placed on heterosexual behaviors. For example, male and female participants who frequented nightclubs expressed their (hetero)sexual identities with little fear of being reprimanded for being *too* sexually explicit. Intimate touching between strangers of the opposite sex is normalized within nightclubs. However, these behaviors were confined to nightclub settings, as it

would be frowned upon in other spaces such as the workplace or a university setting, for instance. [49]

At a *braai*, participants often naturally assumed certain roles without question. These enacted gender roles are accepted within these spaces and are reflected in the division of labor. This shows how gendered behaviors have become institutionalized in these spaces but, overall, through participant observation I also learned that the participants tended to tolerate these binaries even outside of a *braai* setting. Moreover, normalized rituals run the risk of being taken for granted, but through participant observation these ingrained behaviors and gendered stereotypes became more apparent. This realization underscores the significance of participant observation in uncovering subtle social dynamics and shedding light on how individuals navigate and reinforce gender norms in social settings. A sex-toy party, attended only by women, brings forth a different dimension in terms of how (hetero)sexuality and gender are experienced and expressed. At these parties, interactions took place between the saleswomen and the partygoers, and among the female partygoers themselves. Through this process, they actively participated in shaping certain meanings attached to (hetero)sexual identities, while reinforcing acceptable ways of performing "straight" within specific spaces, constantly referring to men's expectations (SMUTS, 2023). In this way, gender norms around what is expected of women sexually remain intact. In this section, I also discussed how I used reflexive exercises to pinpoint my own perceptions around (heterosexual) women's sexual pleasures and desires, and how it informed my argumentation on female (hetero)sexual agency. [50]

In this paper, I have demonstrated the significant value of participant observation as a data-collection method, specifically in gaining insights into the lived experiences of a normalized identity, such as heterosexuality. This identity is complex and expressed in both conscious and subconscious ways, with the latter often providing important insights that may not have been uncovered through interviews alone. Therefore, participant observation should not be viewed as an optional or secondary method, but rather as a complementary approach that can be used in conjunction with other data collection methods. The discomforts I encountered during the data collection phase greatly advanced my perception of how heteronormativity functions. This, in turn, led to a more refined and insightful comprehension of present-day heterosexual identities. However, these experiences underscore the importance of the researcher as a "participant" in the field, as well as raising concerns about the researchers' safety. In support of this point, I refer to the recommendations made by WEBBER and BRUNGER (2018) regarding the need for ethics boards to carefully consider the potential risks faced by *researchers*, particularly in the field of sexuality studies, as well as KLOß's (2017) assertions that this issue should be addressed in formal methodological training. [51]

In conclusion, while I have emphasized the significance of researcher reflexivity, particularly in the context of participant observation, it is equally important to acknowledge and appreciate the self-reflexivity that naturally transpired among the participants themselves (PERERA, 2020). Although not explicitly elaborated

on in this paper, it would be remiss of me not to highlight that throughout this ethnography, the research participants underwent a process of introspection and self-awareness regarding their (hetero)sexual identities. This serves as compelling evidence of how participants become active contributors to the narrative. It is worth noting since it speaks directly to how normalized identities can be demystified through introspection and reciprocal reflexivity, and that this dual collaboration can contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the intricacies surrounding the complex topic under study. [52]

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